



Show Up—Work Hard—Read!
Transcript

Blaine Helwig, Principal: For so many kids at a school like Graham Elementary, the school is a safe haven for them to come to every day. And they're looking for a connection. We set up a relationship with the kiddos where the administrators, the teachers, the custodians—every stakeholder at the school—is always investing in the kids. We invest in them by giving them our time. And there's nothing that gets a kid's attention more, and more often, than a continued and repeated practice of visiting with them, helping them do schoolwork, helping them be successful in the classroom.

Many Short Encounters Build Trust

Blaine Helwig: When I approach a child, and I talk to them, I'm with them 30 seconds to 45 seconds maximum. I hit a lot of frequent, 30-45 seconds, day in and day out, and I try to find out pieces about their lives, and what they're doing, so that when I see them in the morning I have something to talk with them about. And I slowly build a relationship up that we're working together for their success. But it's done very slowly over time. I do ten to fifteen 45-second conversations every day with that same kiddo, I'm just around a lot. It's that frequent contact that I think has a really heightened effect on how they approach school or think about school when they come here.

[Infographic: Student Scores on TAKS: Reading: 2007: 80% proficient or advanced; 2011: 97% proficient or advanced. Math: 2007: 67% proficient or advanced; 2011: 99% proficient or advanced.]

Blaine Helwig: After six years of working at Graham Elementary I'm definitely of the opinion that it's almost absolutely impossible to turn around a high-needs Title I school without having high levels of student conduct as well as running specific stopgap academic programs. At Graham we run three. We run the non-negotiables, which is 800 of the most frequent words, and all students have to be able to spell these words correctly, starting in second grade through fifth grade. The fluency program is the top thousand frequent words where the students will run through those particular words until they can read those words fluently, as well as we run a very structured phonics program.

Maya McElroy, Librarian: We have a mantra, which is Show Up! Work Hard! Read! Nothing happens in this school without a reading component. Reading is absolutely fundamental to all of

our programs, all of our progress we make, the connections we make with children; everything is based on the ability to read.

Blaine Helwig: The other program we run is a schoolwide numeracy program; this is highly differentiated so that they're all working at a particular skill set, to verify that they really understand place value, they really understand rounding, they really have their math facts, they really understand computational skills and the modeling. And we're able to run this from second through fifth grade and scale it with the large number of kiddos we have. Our students are the strongest math students in the state of Texas.

Rebecca Schroeder, Math Specialist: We do drills on addition, multiplication, subtraction, and division, but the kids are really excited about it. We really focus on getting them to feel the sense of accomplishment of knowing their facts and being good at them and proud of that accomplishment.

Blaine Helwig: It's so important to focus on discipline. It affects the overall learning environment, no matter what socio-economic status school you are in. Time is such a valuable resource and you have to have every minute count in the classroom. And so if you have misconduct, student misconduct, or lack of student engagement, you're losing those valuable minutes, and once you lose them, you don't get them back.

Culture, to me, means how someone acts without thinking about it. If you have to think about it, then it's not your culture. So what we try to produce at Graham Elementary is a culture of how someone acts without thinking, how important academics are, how important reading is. The culture is reading, academics, great social behavior.

Dinorah Aquines, Kindergarten Teacher: So maybe we will end up having a class set of rules be the focus. Having them come up with rules and then having a discussion of why that would be a good rule. And of course, not having too many.

No more than five. Some of the classroom rules that they would come up with right away would be no running, no yelling, no hitting. So we will discuss what that might look like. A lot of what they say ends up looking like being respectful. We talk about what that word is, respect. Respecting others, respecting their things, and respecting themselves. It's a big, big word for them, but they really learn that word by the end of the year. And they actually use it with each other.

Blaine Helwig: The only issue with these kiddos—they're coming in, they have very specific academic gaps. Once the gaps are filled, we run exactly like the high socio-economic schools I taught. In a very short time, in mathematics and science, for example, in a year, these kiddos are back up to speed, rolling at a similar academic level we would expect in our highest socio-economic schools.

The mantra at Graham is Show Up, Work Hard, Read. The Show Up part is generally easy to do, but the work hard isn't, and what we press at Graham, and what press with the students, is the importance and value of working hard. And this is what you see with kids after years and years of concerted effort. You see academic success and academic excellence, and it's been accomplished by their own efforts.